

Short tallies have plagued this spring's sheep roundup. Here at the ranch, bitterweed plus the hard winter have sent many an old sister to the brush to die.

Sheep gathering exercise have been hard to score, due to the losses. The thickets are as good at hiding the living as the dead. In some pastures there is still hope that a few wild ones may be left wearing a fleece of wool and leading an unmarked lamb.

Yesterday morning we were short 40 ewes from February in a bunch of under 500. My neighbor, Goat Whiskers the Younger, was helping with the counting, so I know the count was correct. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in higher mathematics. I'm sure he didn't make a mistake. Few outfits have a papered mathematician to do their arithmetic. Other than having a resident veterinarian around, I can't think of a profession that's handier to have on a ranch.

Goat Whiskers' cowhand was practicing counting during the work, too. He came trailing in after the sheep were counted and said that he must have seen over 100 buzzards on his part of the drive. He was blabbing all this at the same time I was rechecking in the tally book to see if the numbers could possibly be correct.

Deep disappointment chills were building up in my chest. I needed a buzzard census about as much as Mr. Nixon needs an unfenced front yard. The Audubon Society has an unfaltering interest in bird population. Bird lovers, I know, perch on granite rocks to watch chickadees flex their feathers. I know a lady one time who ruined her health sitting in the sand on the coast watching for some sort of a sea gull that was supposed to have better roosting manners than pigeons do. But I didn't think I'd ever run across a herder who was a buzzard watcher. Some of them would have made better buzzard watchers than they did cowboys, yet it didn't seem possible that they'd ever do anything like that.

After everybody had heard the old boy's report, he came around and asked me if I knew why buzzards prefer to roost in dead trees. I told him that buzzard lore wasn't in the curriculum back when I went to school. I suggested that he might ask Young Goat Whiskers to buy a set of World Books to put in their saddle shed to answer his nature questions. And if that didn't help, he could probably find a bird watching society that would send him a bundle of pamphlets on buzzards and buzzard roosts. At the moment, I was interested in the sheep industry.

Take this tale as lightly as you please. Losing 40 head of ewes in a dry spring isn't going to make the AP wires. In fact, I feel like we could go back today, rework, the buzzard flyways, and find some of those sheep alive. As you know, it's possible to ride through herds of woolies when you are gazing skywards. Far as that goes, hombres hunting arrowheads have left enough sheep in the pastures without ever looked at the heavens.

The labor scene was already acute, without a standby like Goat Whiskers' cowboy turning to sky gazing. One of my compadres said some time ago that when he passed on he didn't want but one pallbearer at his final checking out ceremonies. He said that as short as extra help was, he didn't want any men taken from the labor force just to pull off a burying operation. He was being mighty thoughtful; I'd guess him to weigh as much as those light yearlings do that come from the southlands.

As long as the buzzards come in every spring, it's going to be hard to get an accurate inventory on the sheep. It would be par for Young Goat Whiskers to forget to buy his man some buzzard books, but I hope he gets them off his mind before the next shearing. Sheep are going to be expensive to gather, with wool bringing below 20 cents a pound.